

Prescription drug access in Medicare aids seniors

By CONGRESSMAN BOB FILNER

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Here at the dawn of the new millennium, scientific advances have brought our world to the point where prescription drugs can play a major role in improving the quality of life of our seniors.

However, unless we act now, these amazing advances will do nothing to help our seniors. By adding a prescription drug benefit to Medicare, a program that seniors know and trust, we can give our seniors access to these prescription drugs and improve their quality of life — and at a reduced cost to the U.S. taxpayer!

The Republican proposals for Medicare would not reform this system—they would eliminate it! Medicare beneficiaries have waited a long time for help, but unfortunately, the Republican legislation falls far short of what seniors and disabled Americans have been waiting for. In fact, it threatens the medical benefits that seniors currently have under Medicare!

For years, the Democrats have pushed for a prescription drug benefit that will meet the needs of our seniors. A Medicare prescription drug benefit should be: affordable, reducing the exorbitant prices of drugs; meaningful, with guaranteed benefits;

within Medicare; and available to all regardless of where they live.

Instead, the House Republican bill fails to meet each and every one of these basic standards.

The Republican House bill does nothing to reduce the cost of prescription drugs. It creates a coverage gap so wide that 50 percent of seniors will fall into it. Anyone paying between \$2000 and \$4900 for medications will receive no prescription drug benefit, even though they will continue to pay Medicare premiums.

The Republican bill leaves the definition of benefits and premium costs to private insurance companies — without any of the traditional Medicare guarantees. And because the Republican bill turns Medicare over to HMOs, millions of seniors in rural areas are especially disadvantaged. More than 80 percent of rural beneficiaries live in counties with no HMO programs — and the Republican bill has no fallback if HMO's don't choose to cover these areas.

We came here to Washington to serve the people of our districts, not to harm them. We are here only because our constitu-



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ents have entrusted us with serious responsibilities.

We owe our parents and grandparents an improved and strengthened Medicare program they know and trust. And we owe future generations a country that is even better and more secure than the one we inherited.

We cannot then, in good faith, start down the path of unraveling the very programs that we came here to strengthen. We cannot undermine Medicare.

Congressman Bob Filner represents California's 51st Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. During his eleven years in Congress, Congressman Filner has achieved a national reputation for his efforts on behalf of our nation's veterans and as an advocate of improved U.S./Mexico relations. Prior to his career in elected office, he taught history at San Diego State University for more than twenty years.